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Licensed Social Workers' Perception of the Role of the Supervisor
and Its Impact on Stress in Social Work

by

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MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the
School of Social Work
University of St. Thomas and St. Catherine University
St. Paul, Minnesota
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

Abstract

This study explores how the role of the supervisor impacts social workers' perceptions of stress in social work practice and how social workers measure the experience of supervision. The study sample consisted of 54 licensed social workers with different levels of licensure selected from the Minnesota Board of Social Work. A mixed method design, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, was used to collect data for this cross-sectional research study. An email with the link to the survey in *Qualtrics* was sent to 160 licensed social workers. The data was assessed using descriptive statistics, chi-square analyses, and grounded theory methodology and coded based on constant comparison analysis.

Findings from this study support previous research that identified that supervisors can both alleviate and create stress for supervisees. Findings also show that respondents consider the supportive role of the supervisor to be most beneficial to their practice, social workers perceive any social work job as stressful, and respondents are satisfied with the level of supportive supervision they receive from their supervisor. Furthermore, respondents perceive supportive supervision to be helpful and it generally has a positive impact on social workers' work with clients. Supervisors will be able to understand and apply the findings to their practice to positively contribute to the supervisor-supervisee relationship. This will also positively impact the supervisee's work with clients. In addition, social workers who are supervisors will be able to employ strategies based on the findings to decrease stress in social work practice as well as be more prepared to provide quality supervision and help staff members develop the skills needed for carrying out their work.

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	4
Conceptual Framework.....	17
Methods.....	20
Findings.....	23
Discussion.....	47
Conclusion	54
References.....	56
Appendix A.....	59
Appendix B.....	65

List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1. Age	24
Figure 2. Gender	25
Figure 3. Race/ethnicity	25
Figure 4. Level of Licensure	26
Figure 5. Area of Social Work Practice	27
Table 1. Length of Supervision and Levels of Work-Related Stress in the Last Year.	32

Social work is a demanding profession and many social workers experience stress (Collins, 2008). Stress amongst social workers is an important issue, not only due to the nature and organizational structure of the work, but because a stressed workforce can impact social work practice (Collings & Murray, 1996; Storey & Billingham, 2001).

This topic has a long history in literature and there is also current research regarding stress in social work. According to Jones and Fletcher, “‘stress’ appears to be prevalent in today’s society, receiving much attention in the general press and research articles” (as cited in Storey & Billingham, 2001, p. 660). “Stress” is defined as a “constraining force or influence: as a physical, chemical, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension and may be a factor in disease causation” and “a state resulting from a stress; *especially* : one of bodily or mental tension resulting from factors that tend to alter an existent equilibrium <job-related stress>” (Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary, 2013). The majority of people encounter stress, whether it is at home, at work, or in their personal lives. Many articles refer to stress in social work and in social workers’ experience; however, few identify percentages or number of social workers impacted by stress. Sze and Ivker report “68 percent of community mental health centre social workers report being under stress” (as cited in Coyle, Edwards, Hannigan, Fothergill, & Burnard, 2005, p. 205).

Collings and Murray report “burnout is a particularly serious feature of chronic stress and one that can impair the human service worker’s effectiveness” (as cited in Lloyd, King, & Chenoweth, 2002, p. 256). Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter define and explain burnout: “Burnout is a syndrome with dimensions of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced feelings of personal accomplishment” (as cited in Lloyd et al., 2002, p. 256). Workers who experience

burnout feel they do not have any more that they can give, they become negative towards their clients and work, and they are dissatisfied with their work accomplishments (Lloyd et al., 2002).

Researchers' state stress is detrimental to both the service social workers provide to clients and on the individual's health (Storey & Billingham, 2001). Bennet, Evans, and Tattersall state "there is evidence to suggest that social workers experience relatively high levels of both work-related anxiety and trait depression when compared with normative populations and workers in other professions" (as cited in Coyle et al., 2005, p. 204).

Researchers also link stress with irritableness, lower marital satisfaction, physical exhaustion, emotional exhaustion, poorer mental well-being, depersonalization, desire to leave one's job or the profession entirely, and feelings of lack of personal accomplishment and job satisfaction (Coyle et al., 2005; Lloyd et al., 2002). In addition, stress plays a major factor in the development of cardiovascular diseases, physical disorders (e.g. cancer, ulcers, headaches, migraines, and skin disorders), burnout, high costs for the community, losses in work time and productivity for the employers, and decreased job performance (Coyle et al., 2005; Storey & Billingham, 2001).

Stress impacts both the social worker and quality of services provided to clients. "Social work professionals with low levels of work-related stress are more productive and therefore more beneficial to client systems served by the agency" (Vosejpka, 2008, p. 34). Acker (1999) agrees that social workers who are burned out and do not have satisfaction in their jobs are more likely to provide poor quality of services. Storey and Billingham (2001) also report that high levels of stress were felt to be detrimental to the services provided to clients.

Stress in the workplace can also lead to job dissatisfaction and desire to leave one's job or the profession (Coyle et al., 2005; Lloyd et al., 2002). This has a negative impact on both the

profession of social work and social welfare. Currently there is a high need for social workers, particularly for mental health services (NASW Public Affairs Office, 2002). A decrease in the number and availability of social workers would bring about negative consequences for agencies and clients. Social workers would not be available to provide services, the quality of services would be negatively affected, and there would be a greater responsibility and a higher workload placed on social workers who are currently employed. In turn, those social workers may experience greater levels of stress, job dissatisfaction, and the desire to leave their job or the profession. In essence, the cycle of stress' impact on the social worker and social welfare would continue.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of the supervisor and its impact on stress in social work practice. This research project will explore how the role of the supervisor impacts social workers' perceptions of stress in social work practice and how social workers measure the experience of supervision.

The proposed study will provide information for social workers who are supervisors and for those who are supervisees. Social workers who are supervisors will be able to understand and apply the findings to their practice and positively contribute to the supervisor-supervisee relationship. They will also be able to employ strategies to decrease stress in social work practice as well as be more prepared to provide quality supervision and help staff members develop the skills needed for carrying out their work (Himle, Jayaratne, & Thyness, 1991; Kickul & Posig, 2001; Mor Barak, Travis, Pyun, & Xie, 2009; Shulman, 2010; Zhang, Tsingan, & Zhang, 2013). In turn, this will enrich the social work field by contributing to the development of well-prepared social workers, decrease stress for social workers, and influence the outcomes of practice with clients (Cotter Mena & Bailey, 2007; Shulman, 2010).

Similarly, social workers who receive supervision will be better able to understand the supervisor-supervisee relationship and play an active role in influencing the behavior of the supervisor and the outcome of the supervisor-supervisee process (Mor Barak et al., 2009; Shulman, 2010). Social workers will also be able to utilize the supervisor for support and as a protective factor against stress. Finally, the answers will positively contribute to the social work field and to client outcomes (Cotter Mena & Bailey, 2007; Shulman, 2010).

Literature Review

Sources of Stress

Studies suggest that there are a variety of sources for job stress that impact social workers. The main source of stress identified for social workers is the challenge of the job (Acker, 1999; Coffey, Dugdill, & Tattersall, 2004; Coyle et al., 2005; Dillenburg, 2004; Lloyd et al., 2002; Shinn, Rosario, Morch, & Chestnut, 1984; Storey & Billingham, 2001; Vosejkpa, 2008). Social workers in many agencies tend to have large workloads, face critical and complex issues with clients, and have too little time to perform duties to the person's satisfaction. In addition, social workers lack the resources (i.e. funding, support, and staffing) to do the work required of them. New legislation may also require social workers to assume further responsibilities with limited control or autonomy (Lloyd et al., 2002). Consequently, social workers may think they are not able to give people the help they need and feel pressure from planning and reaching work targets.

Other sources of stress that have been studied include relationships with clients and co-workers, lack of support from supervisors, work environment/organizational structure, and role ambiguity (Aker, 1999; Collings & Murray, 1996; Coyle et al., 2005; Dillenburg, 2004; Lloyd et al., 2002; Shinn et al., 1984; Storey & Billingham, 2001; Vosejkpa, 2008). Social work often

takes place in a team context. Teams that are not supportive of individual colleagues and do not provide effective teamwork can contribute to stress for workers (Coyle et al., 2005; Storey & Billingham, 2001). In addition, much emphasis is placed during training on the relationship between client and social worker. As a result, the worker may assume personal responsibility for failure (Lloyd et al., 2002). Similarly, the physical working environment and organizational structure can affect workers' well-being. For example, overcrowding, working in an open-plan style office, and the extent to which a person can take part and influence decision-making processes all have a significant effect on the development of stress (Coyle et al., 2005; Lloyd et al., 2002; Storey & Billingham, 2001).

Finally, social work values and expected role performance, how others view social work, and lack of recognition are sources of stress (Collings & Murray, 1996; Coyle et al., 2005; Lloyd et al., 2002; Shinn et al., 1984; Storey & Billingham, 2001). Lloyd, King, and Chenoweth's (2002) research indicated there may be conflict between social work values (e.g. advocacy, social justice, client self-determination, and empowerment) and expected role performance. Society holds high expectations about social workers' performance in areas such as child protection or mental health. These expectations frequently place social workers under great pressure and can become a source of stress (Collings & Murray, 1996; Storey & Billingham, 2001). Additionally, not feeling valued as an employee is a factor associated with increase in stress (Coyle et al., 2005; Lloyd et al., 2002).

Stress Outcomes

As previously noted, research indicates that social workers are likely to experience negative emotional and/or physical outcomes as a result of stress (Coyle et al., 2005; Lloyd et al., 2002; Storey & Billingham, 2001). The emotional effects related to stress are identified as

depression, anxiety, irritableness, lower marital satisfaction, emotional exhaustion, feelings of lack of personal accomplishment, poor job satisfaction, depersonalization, and thoughts of leaving a job or career (Coyle et al., 2005; Dillenburg, 2004; Lloyd et al., 2002). Job satisfaction is of particular importance and studies have shown that stress can lead to decreased job performance which can have an impact on the quality of the social worker's work and work morale (Dillenburg, 2004; Storey & Billingham, 2001). It can also impact staff turn-over as people "attempt to get away from poor conditions, stress, over-work, low morale and factors creating dissatisfaction" (Storey & Billingham, 2001, p. 662).

The physical outcomes related to stress are identified as physical exhaustion, lack of sleep, overeating or not eating, cardiovascular diseases, physical disorders, and taking sick days (Dillenburg, 2004; Storey & Billingham, 2001). Increased rates of a multitude of physical disorders such as cancer, ulcers, headaches, and migraines have been linked to stress. As a result, some individuals need to take sick days or may have to work even when they are generally unwell. These potential reactions to stress have serious consequences for the individual. They also result in high costs for the community, losses in work time and productivity for the employers, and decreased job performance (Coyle et al., 2005; Storey & Billingham, 2001).

Coping Strategies for Stress

Several studies have explored coping strategies related to stress. Research suggests social support and supervision are primary methods to alleviate stress (Acker, 1999; Collins, 2008; Dillenburg, 2004; Lloyd et al., 2002; Storey & Billingham, 2001). Social support from colleagues and family, such as seeking practical advice, assistance or information, and support for emotional reasons, helps to mediate burnout (as defined above) and improve job satisfaction

(Collins, 2008; Lloyd et al., 2002). Supervision is a major form of social worker support and social workers often turn to their supervisors for assistance with cases and for help with further development of skills. When supervisor support is effective, it is associated with lower levels of burnout, work stress, and mental health problems. In other words, social workers who perceive their supervisor as supportive have less potential for burnout (Lloyd et al., 2002). The role of the supervisor and supervision will be discussed further below.

Other methods to alleviate stress are: humor, counseling, medication (Storey & Billingham, 2001), vacation time (Storey & Billingham, 2001; Shinn et al., 1984), stress management training (Storey & Billingham, 2001; Coffey et al., 2004), acceptance, positive cognitive restructuring, and personality characteristics such as optimism, resiliency, and good self-esteem (Collins, 2008). Both “acceptance” and “positive cognitive restructuring” may help alleviate work related stress. Collins (2008) defined acceptance as “a functional coping response in that a person who accepts the reality of a stressful situation will be willing to be engaged in an attempt to resolve it” (p. 1177). He also defined positive cognitive restructuring as “re- interpreting stressful situations more positively – a type of emotion-focused coping aimed at managing distress emotions, rather than dealing with the stressor itself” (Collins, 2008, p. 1177).

Coping strategies are crucial in alleviating and resisting stress. They act as an intervening and moderating factor between outcomes of stress and benefit the worker. They also improve the quality and quantity of work for those who use the service (Storey & Billingham, 2001).

Supervision and Stress

Definition of supervisor. As previously mentioned, the literature about supervision and stress points out that supervisors can be a cause of stress and also help in preventing stress.

Kadushin defines the role and function of a social work supervisor (as cited in Shulman, 2010).

Additionally, Kadushin discusses the three major functions of the supervisor:

A social work supervisor is an agency administrative staff member to whom authority is delegated to direct, coordinate, enhance, and evaluate on-the-job performance of the supervisees for whose work he [or she] is held accountable. In implementing this responsibility the supervisor performs administrative, educational, and supportive functions in interaction with the supervisee in the context of a positive relationship. The supervisor's ultimate objective is to deliver to agency clients the best possible service, both quantitative and qualitatively, in accordance with agency policies and procedures. (as cited in Shulman, 2010, p. 24)

The supervisor's general tasks include administrative, educational, and supportive functions. These activities slightly overlap and all influence the supervisee's behavior and enhance growth among professionals, paraprofessionals, and nonprofessionals (Weinbach & Taylor, 2011).

Role of supervisor. Administrative supervision involves activities such as “work assignment and task supervision, overseeing, communicating, serving as a buffer between higher-level administrators and workers, and matching of workers to tasks” (Weinbach & Taylor, 2011, pp. 217-218). Supportive supervision provides emotional support to supervisees. “With this support, professionals can continue to function well on the job without being overwhelmed by the stresses that are inherent in their work” (Weinbach & Taylor, 2011, p. 218). Educational supervision provides knowledge to the supervisee to help them grow professionally and succeed in their careers (Weinbach & Taylor, 2011).

The distinction of the amount of supervision needed in each function should be evaluated by the supervisor to best meet the supervisee's needs. The amount needed in each function is not the same for everyone and the term *support* does not mean the same for everyone (Shulman, 2010). For example, one person may perceive support as the educational function versus the supportive or administrative functions. In addition, the supervisee's needs may change as they develop professionally and as the supervisor-supervisee relationship develops (Shulman, 2010).

Impact of stress on supervisor. In addition to the common sources of stress for social workers mentioned above, supervisors may experience stress from criticism and conflict, loss of client contact, responsibility for decision making, power issues, and interpersonal relationships with subordinates (Weinbach & Taylor, 2011). Stress affects a frontline supervisor's availability to workers, capacity for empathy, and ability to implement a consultation role as well as the ability of the worker to talk openly to the supervisor (Shulman, 2010).

Supervisor as Support

Research suggests that supervisor support is effective in reducing and alleviating stress for workers (Collings & Murray, 1996; Collins, 2008; Dillenburg, 2004; Himle et al., 1991; Lloyd et al., 2002; Mor Barak et al., 2009; Rauktis & Koeske, 1994). Storey and Billingham (2001) stated "the higher the level of support received, the lower the level of stress. This pattern also emerges for levels of support from seniors/supervisors and level of stress. . . . Support from seniors/supervisors was more effective in reducing stress levels" (p. 667).

Supervisors assist with cases and further development of workers' skills. Gibbs revealed that "a nurturing supervision is one way of helping social workers feel significant to users and their organization, while supporting them to cope with the emotional demands of their work" (as cited in Collins, 2008, pp. 1181-1182). In addition, "the supervisor has a key role in acting as a

link for the team to the wider organization” and “encouraging, facilitating and co-ordinating the participation of individual social workers in forming and attending various diverse support groups” (Collins, 2008, p. 1182).

Literature and research findings imply that more frequent, regular, extensive, better informed, and more sensitive supervision is likely to provide more effective support for social workers (Collins, 2008). Collings and Murray (1996) agreed that “supervision meetings which reinforce the social worker’s value in the organization and which are not perceived as primarily supervisor-oriented, would seem to promote lower levels of stress” (p. 385).

According to Weinbach and Taylor (2011), “good supervision consistently stresses the need for high-quality and ethical client services” (p. 218), provides practical assistance and a role model for staff, and stresses the need for professionals to base their work on available knowledge and to be active in evaluation of their own practice. Effective supervision can buffer the negative effects of working in social and human service organizations. It can contribute to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and worker retention. In addition, it can contribute to worker effectiveness and quality service delivery (Mor Barak et al., 2009; Weinbach & Taylor, 2011).

Negative Impact of Supervision

Supervision can also have a negative impact on stress for workers. Research shows that supervisor support can have a reverse buffering effect on stress for workers. The reverse buffering effect suggests that supervisor emotional support will exacerbate the strain on employees rather than alleviate employee emotional exhaustion (Kickul & Posig, 2001). Kickul and Posig (2001) proposed that this may be due to the nature of the relationship between the form of emotional support and the stressors of role conflict and time pressure. Many of the

behaviors and demands placed on employees by their supervisors may be seen as causing stress for the supervisee (Kickul & Posig, 2001). For example, a supervisor may offer emotional support but not listen carefully to the supervisee and this can contribute to stress for the supervisee.

Kickul and Posig (2001) also suggested that the supervisor's actions may be inconsistent with the words of emotional support being offered and these mixed messages may exacerbate stress. "Inconsistent messages and the manner in which they are communicated may influence how an employee behaves and reacts to the demands of his/her job" (Kickul & Posig, 2001, p. 339).

Collins (2008) provided information from other researchers regarding the negative impact of supervisor support. Balloch, Pahl, and MacLean suggested that half of the social workers studied felt support from their manager or supervisor was not important (as cited in Collins, 2008). Additionally, Gibbs' qualitative study of front line child protection workers in Australia reported "it was found that supervision gave insufficient attention to the emotional demands of work and to the worker's self-esteem and resilience" (as cited in Collins, 2008, p. 1181). Finally, Regeher, Hemsworth, Leslie, Howe, and Chau's study indicated that social support from supervisors was of limited value in relieving symptoms of distress (as cited in Collins, 2008).

Supervision also seems to be a potent source of social worker stress when it is carried out in certain ways (Collings & Murray, 1996). Kadushin stated "supervisors may not have as much knowledge as their supervisees or may not be able to teach what their supervisees need to learn. . . The challenge, then, is for supervisors to promote their supervisee's growth without stifling the supervisee" (as cited in Kaiser, 1997, p. 30). In addition, supervision that does not meet the needs or expectations of the supervisee may be seen as stressful to supervisees (Kaiser, 1997).

The work environment may also contribute to the reverse buffering effect. As briefly mentioned above, supportive supervision cannot ensure high morale and job satisfaction when the work environment is highly demanding (Rauktis & Koeske, 1994). The workload, challenge of the job, and work environment may negatively impact how supervision is perceived and utilized by workers. It may also negatively impact how supervision is provided by supervisors. Supervisors themselves may be stressed and fail to respond empathically to their supervisees' problems.

Impact of Supervision on Organization

Literature illustrates that supervision positively or negatively impacts the organization. Good supervision can aid organizations in meeting goals and contributing to service effectiveness (Mor Barak et al., 2009). Workers who receive supportive supervision are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs, in turn, increasing production and efficiency to meet goals and deadlines (Cotter Mena & Bailey, 2007; Mor Barak et al., 2009; Storey & Billingham, 2001).

On the other hand, lack of supervision is related to high turnover (Cotter Mena & Bailey, 2007; Kim & Lee, 2009; Mor Barak et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2013). Higher levels of support from supervisors are linked to higher job satisfaction for workers (Storey & Billingham, 2001). Employees who are not satisfied with their job may be more likely to leave their job. Consequently, the organization is less likely to retain employees and will have a vacancy until new employees can be hired and trained.

Impact of Supervision on Supervisee

Beneficial outcomes. Research reveals that higher levels of support from supervisors produce higher job satisfaction for workers (Cotter Mena & Bailey, 2007; Mor Barak et al.,

2009; Storey & Billingham, 2001; Zhang et al., 2013). In addition, workers have higher job satisfaction from receiving support by supervisors than receiving support from colleagues (Storey & Billingham, 2001). In other words, a supervisor can positively enhance a supervisee's overall work experience. A supportive supervisor can contribute to worker's organizational commitment, heightened sense of psychological well-being, empowerment, and personal accomplishment, and effectiveness on the job (Mor Barak et al., 2009).

Support from supervisors can also produce beneficial outcomes related to physical and mental health (Lloyd et al., 2002). "Social support from supervisors is associated with reductions of such negative worker outcomes as anxiety, depression, somatic complaints, depersonalization, and emotional exhaustion" (Mor Barak et al., 2009, p. 10). Lloyd et al.'s (2002) research explained that emotional support by supervisors is associated with lower levels of mental health problems. They also noted that social workers who perceive their supervisor as supportive have less potential for burnout (Lloyd et al., 2002). In addition, supervisor support is important in limiting detrimental outcomes such as intention to leave the job, job stress, and turnover (Lloyd et al., 2002; Mor Barak et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2013).

Furthermore, research shows that supervisor support mediates the relationship between role stressors and job attitudes (Lloyd et al., 2002; Zhang et al., 2013). "[When] workers felt they had greater rapport with their supervisors, they also rated their job satisfaction higher in the areas of advancement, policy and procedures, recognition, security, supervision-human relations and supervision-technical" (Cotter Mena & Bailey, 2007, p. 59). "Supervision-human relations" refers to support specifically of a positive working alliance. "Supervision-technical" refers to goals and tasks including specific case reviews. Kim and Lee (2009) determined that "supervisory communication serves a critical role in models of health social worker burnout in

terms of reducing the perceived levels of job stress” (p. 368) and concurred that supervisor support reduces turnover intention. Rauktis and Koeske (1994) concurred that the greater the level of supervisor support the greater the degree of job satisfaction; however, the degree of the workload impacts supportive supervision on intrinsic satisfaction. “Supportive supervision enhances intrinsic satisfaction when work load is low or moderate, *but not when it is high*” (Rauktis & Koeske, 1994, p. 52). For example, child protection social workers have a very demanding job and high workloads. Frequently there are a lot of children at risk and not enough social workers to meet the needs of the children. Consequently, they often encounter stress and burnout and this poses a limiting condition for the benefit of supportive supervision. In other words, work environments characterized by excessive work demands “cancel the normally beneficial influence of a supportive supervisor” (Rauktis & Koeske, 1994, p. 54).

Detrimental outcomes. Research indicates that lack of supervisor support can produce negative emotional and physical outcomes. It can also have negative effects on workers’ health (Storey & Billingham, 2001). Kim and Lee (2009) found that lack of supervisor support increases a worker’s level of depression, sick-leave absences, turnover intention, and self-reported health problems. Mor Barak, Travis, Pyun, and Xie (2009) supported this claim reporting lack of supervisor support can impact the emotional and physical status of the worker such as burnout, depression, and other forms of mental distress. In addition, Himle, Jayaratne and Thyness “found that supervisor support effectively buffered effects of role conflict on turnover, anxiety, somatic complaints, depression, and irritation and concluded that supervisory support helps to reduce workers’ psychological stress and subsequent burnout and job dissatisfaction” (as cited in Cotter Mena & Bailey, 2007, p. 56).

Lack of supervisor support also impedes worker effectiveness and service quality. It contributes to job stress such as role conflict, role ambiguity, decreased job satisfaction, and role overload as well (Mor Barak et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2013). Zhang, Tsingan, and Zhang (2013) stated it also leads to high intention to leave one's job. Research suggests this may be due to depersonalization and emotional exhaustion. Additionally, "supervisors' abusive behaviors were found to be positively related to depersonalization and emotional exhaustion of subordinates and the subordinates' use of forceful upward influence tactics" (Yagil, 2006, p. 49). Forceful upward influence tactics include retaliation, punishment, resistance, and resentment towards the abusive supervisor. For example, an employee may behave in a domineering and argumentative manner to influence a supervisor when they do not agree with or like the supervisor versus using persuasion to influence a supervisor that they agree with and hold in positive regards (Yagil, 2006).

Impact of Supervision on Client Outcomes

Research and literature provide evidence that lack of supervisor support impacts the supervisee which in turn impacts the quality and consistency of client services (Cotter Mena & Bailey, 2007; Kim & Lee, 2009). Newsome and Pillari reported researchers have found a connection between the supervisory relationship and satisfaction in their work with clients (as cited in Cotter Mena & Bailey, 2007). In addition, Cole, Panchanadeswaran, and Daining, Newsome and Pillari, and Rauktis and Koeske demonstrated there is a connection between the supervisory relationship and worker job satisfaction (as cited in Cotter Mena & Bailey, 2007). In other words, because worker job satisfaction is closely related to client outcomes these outcomes may be impacted if a worker is stressed and does not receive supportive supervision.

Storey and Billingham's (2001) research supported this claim that "[when] perceived stress within the work place is prevalent at high levels for many individuals, this stress was felt to be detrimental to the service they provided to the users" (p. 668). Effective supervision of workers in social and human service organizations has the potential to generate positive client outcomes and ineffective supervision can be detrimental to both workers and their clients (Mor Barak et al., 2009). Yagil (2006) argued that a lack of supervision affects therapists' interaction with clients, including the type of influence strategies that therapists use. For instance, therapists may choose maladaptive strategies and use of coercive influence tactics such as manipulation, punishment, and coercion (Yagil, 2006).

The quality and effectiveness of supervision can have an impact on client outcomes. Shulman (2010) argued that there is a parallel process between the supervisor-supervisee relationship and the interaction between supervisees and clients. Shulman (2010) stated:

A supervisor interacting skillfully with a supervisee will have a positive impact on their working relationship. This relationship will be the medium through which a supervisor may influence the supervisee's practice. In turn, the supervisee's behaviors may influence the outcomes of practice with clients. (p. 15)

The elements and technical skill of supervision may be used by the supervisee with clients. If a supervisor effectively uses skills such as tuning-in, contracting, empathy, elaborating, and sharing feelings with a supervisee, the supervisee may effectively use those skills with the client (Shulman, 2010). In other words, supervisors act as models and their words and actions are crucial to the supervisor-supervisee relationship and to customer service and interaction with clients by supervisees. Social work management is key to client service and "management, when performed well at all levels, contributes greatly to achieving" the best possible services to clients

(Weinbach & Taylor, 2011, p. 3). If a supervisor does not demonstrate empathy and willingness to help a supervisee, this may influence the manner in which the supervisee relates to clients (Mor Barak et al., 2009; Shulman, 2010; Weinbach & Taylor, 2011).

Conceptual Framework

The articulation of research lenses is important in any research study. A lens is a way of understanding a particular phenomenon under study and each lens emphasizes specific concepts and provides a framework of how things are viewed and addressed (M. Chovanec, personal communication, July 25, 2013). It is important to understand the lens that was used in any research study because it will improve the reader's understanding of how the research study was developed, how the lens will likely impact the interpretation of the data, and provide important context for the reader to critically assess the research. This research project was viewed through the person-in-environment, Systems Theory, and Social Exchange Theory lenses. In addition, the researcher's professional and personal lenses contributed to the project development and data analysis.

Theoretical Lenses

Kadushin's definition for a social work supervisor and the three major functions of the supervisor as defined by Shulman (2010) was utilized in this research project. These three major functions of the social work supervisor as defined in the literature review are: education, administration, and support. In addition, Shulman's (2010) model of supervision, called Interactional Supervision, was used as a framework for this project. This model states that both the supervisor and supervisee contribute to the supervisor-supervisee relationship and that the supervisor has an impact on client outcomes through supervisees (Shulman, 2010).

The person-in-environment approach was also used to assess the impact of the supervisor on stress in social work practice. The person-in-environment model focuses on the environment and the individual (Kondrat, 2008). The Council on Social Work Education states this approach “highlights the importance of understanding an individual and his or her behavior in light of the various environmental contexts in which that person lives and acts” (as cited in Kondrat, 2008, para. 3). This incorporates the parallel process between the treatment of the social worker by the supervisor and its impact on client outcomes (Kondrat, 2008; Shulman, 2010).

Person-in-environment theory is used to promote the general welfare and development of individuals, families, and communities and this was used to assess the impact of the supervisor on stress in social work practice (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). For example, the person-in-environment approach was used to look at both the person and environment regarding causes and contributions to the role of the supervisor and its impact on stress in social work. This provides a wider lens and more opportunities for preparation of data collection instrument and process and interpretation of data. The person-in-environment approach also offers more diversity and looks at social justice issues such as community and the common good. In this approach, human relationships are seen as central, enabling people to meet their needs.

In addition, the Systems Theory was utilized. The supervisor interacts with social workers, clients, agency, community, and co-workers and each member of the system impacts the other. For instance, the supervisor can affect client outcomes through the relationship with the supervisor. Therefore, each part of the system impacts the whole system and can individually or altogether contribute to stress for social workers. Shulman (2010) describes that the supervisor, supervisee, agency, clients, staff, and community influence and are being influenced by each other:

The supervisor and worker are constantly influencing and being influenced by the behavior and expressed emotions of the others. The same would be true of the relationship between the supervisor and the staff group. Each has a part to play in the process, with the supervisor's part designed to help the worker or workers play their part. The dynamic nature of the interaction means that the behavior of either actor cannot be understood as separate from the behavior of the other. . . . This dynamic can also be seen in the worker-client relationship. (pp. 12-13)

Finally, Social Exchange Theory provides a theoretical framework for this project development and data analysis. This offers insight into the connection with the supervisor-supervisee relationship and client outcomes. Both Blau and Cook explain the Social Exchange Theory:

According to social exchange theory, the way an individual thinks about a relationship is based on the balance between her or his efforts in the relationship and the rewards, whether anticipated or actual. The theory implies that if the supervisory exchange is deemed to be beneficial, the worker will reciprocate by having more positive emotions toward the supervisor and toward the workplace. (as cited in Mor Barak et al., 2009, p. 8)

In turn, the supervisee will have greater job satisfaction, be more productive, and enable positive client outcomes. On the contrary, if the supervisee deems the supervisor-supervisee relationship to be detrimental, then they are more likely to negatively view the supervisor and their job. Consequently, this may negatively impact client outcomes (Mor Barak et al., 2009).

Professional Lens

The researcher has received supervision for jobs, internships, and for completion of the social work licensure requirements for the professional level of a Licensed Social Worker. The

researcher has had supportive supervisors and unsupportive supervisors. These experiences may have impacted the project development and data analysis as the researcher reflected on her supervision experiences as a Licensed Social Worker and in obtaining her Master of Social Work degree. This information and awareness of the researcher's professional experiences assisted with the formulation of the research topic, choice of method, selection of participants, and research design.

Personal Lens

This topic was chosen due to the researcher's interest in stress and social work and past experiences with supportive supervisors and unsupportive supervisors. Literature demonstrates that the role of the supervisor can be a protective factor against stress and can also contribute to stress in social work. In addition, the role of the supervisor may influence client outcomes. This topic is important because it will provide useful answers regarding supervision and its impact on stress. It will also provide a framework for future practice as a social worker who receives supervision and who may provide supervision to others.

Previous interactions with supervisors may have affected the treatment of this topic. In addition, information obtained from research and the class Clinical Supervision and Program Management may have affected the treatment of this topic. The interactions and information may have directed the questions asked of research participants and influenced how the information was assessed and interpreted.

Methods

Research Design

The Supervisory Style subscale (in Kickul & Posig, 2001), Supervision Scale (in Rauktis & Koeske, 1994), social support measures (in Himle et al., 1991), and a survey created by Emily C. Vosejka (in Vosejka, 2008) were reviewed for potential use as survey instruments.

Due to a gap in those instruments and the desired focus of this project, the researcher created a survey with both qualitative and quantitative questions. The survey was created based on information from those instruments and input from the Research Chair and Committee Members. The survey questions were driven by the focus of this project (see Appendix A).

A mixed method design, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, was used to collect data for this cross-sectional research study. The survey was used to provide quantitative and qualitative questions to explore the impact both social workers and supervisors think the supervisor has on worker stress in social work practice. It also looked at how social workers perceive stress and how social workers describe the actual experience of supervision. Respondents were asked to answer a structured 13 to 21 question survey. The survey conditionally populated questions for respondents based on answer selection to previous questions in the survey. The survey consisted of three open-ended questions and 10 to 18 closed-ended questions.

Sample

A simple random sample of 160 licensed social workers with different levels of licensure was obtained from the Minnesota Board of Social Work. An email with the link to the survey in *Qualtrics* was sent to licensed social workers using the list from the Minnesota Board of Social Work. The email included contact information for the researcher, a letter of informed consent, and outlined any potential risks to them as a participant in the study. This email was sent a total of three times to respondents who had not yet taken or started the survey in *Qualtrics*.

Protection of Human Subjects

A letter of informed consent was provided in the email with the link to the survey (see Appendix B). This letter communicated the goals of the survey, procedure for administration, risks and benefits, confidentiality, voluntary nature of the study, and contact information for the researcher. Participants were made aware that there are no known risks and direct benefits of being in the study and participation in the survey is voluntary. Additionally, they were informed they could choose not to participate or skip questions on the survey and it would not affect their relationship with the School of Social Work, the Minnesota Board of Social Work, the University of St. Thomas or St. Catherine University, or the researcher in any way. The informed consent letter specified location of the data which was kept on a password protected computer, plans for destroying data post-analysis, and who would have access to the survey and data. Approval for this research project was obtained from the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board as well. The anticipated destruction date for the data is no later than May 31, 2014.

Furthermore, because participants were able to complete the survey online using *Qualtrics*, confidentiality is protected. This system provided data to the researcher but the researcher did not disclose or identify who responded to the survey. The survey asked general descriptive information as well as workers' opinions and ideas but identity of the respondents is protected. In other words, records of the study were kept confidential.

Data Collection

Data was collected through an online survey and data analysis program available through *Qualtrics*. Respondents were informed that their participation in the survey implied informed

consent in the email and informed consent letter. Data is available and stored on a password protected computer until May 31, 2014.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data collected from the completed surveys was measured through the use of nominal and ordinal forms of measurement. Descriptive and inferential statistical data analysis was completed on the collected data through the *Qualtrics* program to further interpret the findings. The qualitative data collected from the completed surveys was analyzed based on grounded theory methodology and coded based on constant comparison analysis (Padgett, 2008). Grounded theory “entails inductive coding from the data, memo writing to document analytic decisions, and weaving in theoretical ideas and concepts without permitting them to drive or constrain the study’s emergent findings” (Padgett, 2008, p. 32). Constant comparison analysis “describes a systematic search for similarities and differences across interviews, incidents, and contexts” (Padgett, 2008, p. 155). In other words, codes emerged from the data and analysis and coding of the transcript moved from specific words to subthemes, to more general concepts and themes. Occasionally, words within the transcript emerged and were coded based on topics in the literature review.

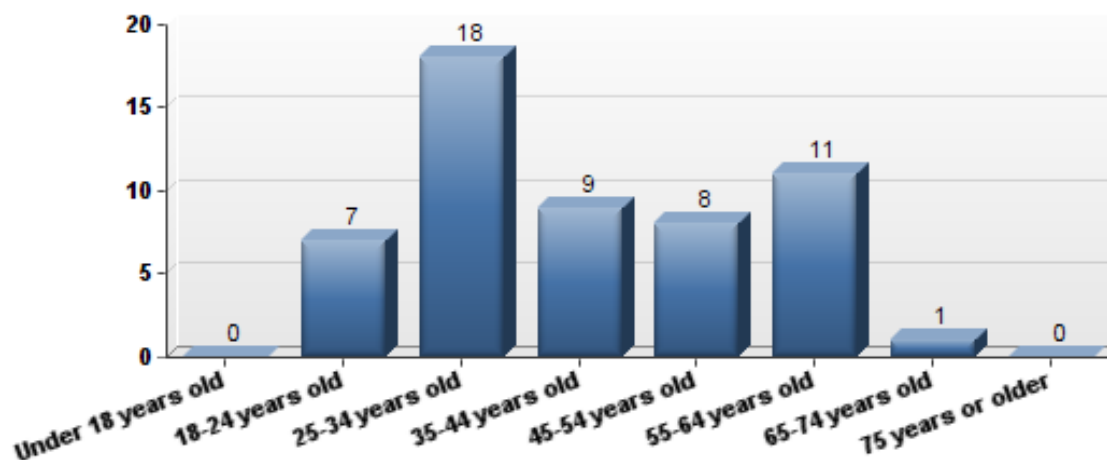
Findings

A total of 59 out of 160 respondents participated in the online survey; however, five of those respondents did not finish the online survey. As a result, the data used during analysis is from the completed surveys of 54 respondents unless otherwise identified below. Both quantitative and qualitative findings are discussed below. This section starts with providing information about the quantitative findings and then providing information about the qualitative findings.

Demographic Data

Age. This ordinal variable measures the respondents' age. The response options are under 18 years old, 18-24 years old, 25-34 years old, 35-44 years old, 45-54 years old, 55-64 years old, 65-74 years old, and 75 years or older. The research question for the study is: What age are the respondents? The findings of this study show that seven (13%) respondents are 18-24 years old, 18 (33%) respondents are 25-34 years old, nine (17%) respondents are 35-44 years old, eight (15%) respondents are 45-54 years old, 11 (20%) respondents are 55-64 years old, and one (2%) respondent is 65-74 years old. There were no respondents under the age of 18 years old or 75 years or older. These findings show that the large majority of the sample is between the ages of 25-34 years old.

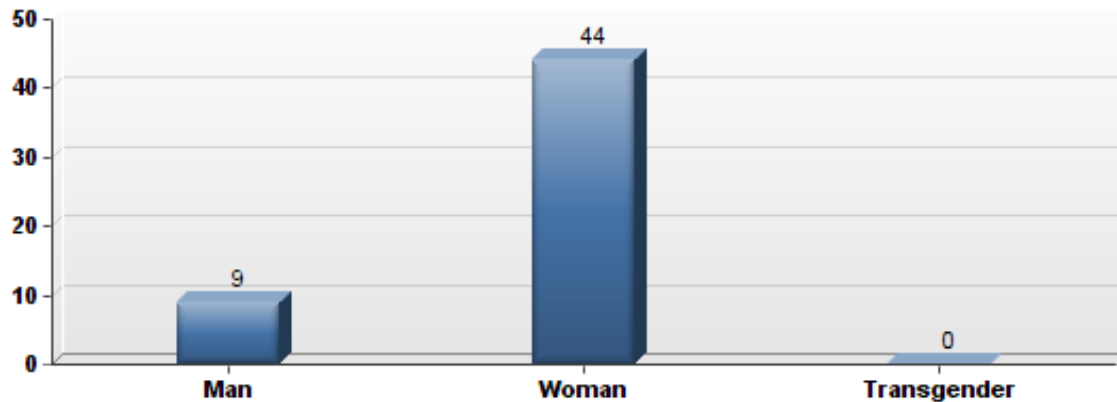
Figure 1. Age.



Gender. This nominal variable measures the respondents' gender. The response options are man, woman, and transgender. The research question for the study is: How many men, women, and transgender people are in the sample? Fifty-three respondents answered the survey question: What is your gender? The findings show that nine (17%) respondents are men, 44

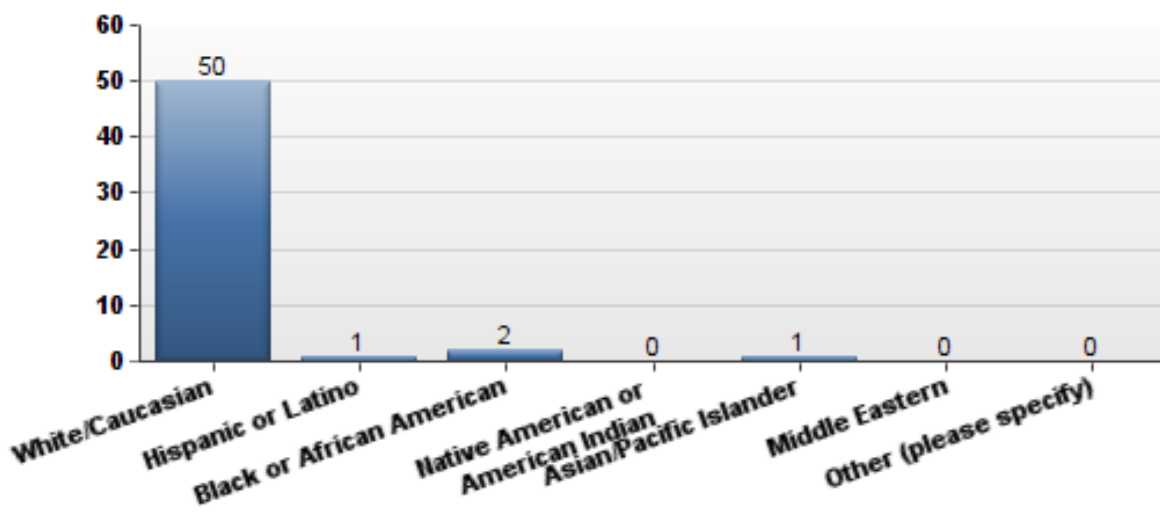
(83%) respondents are women, and zero (0%) respondents are transgender. These findings show that the large majority of the sample is women.

Figure 2. Gender.



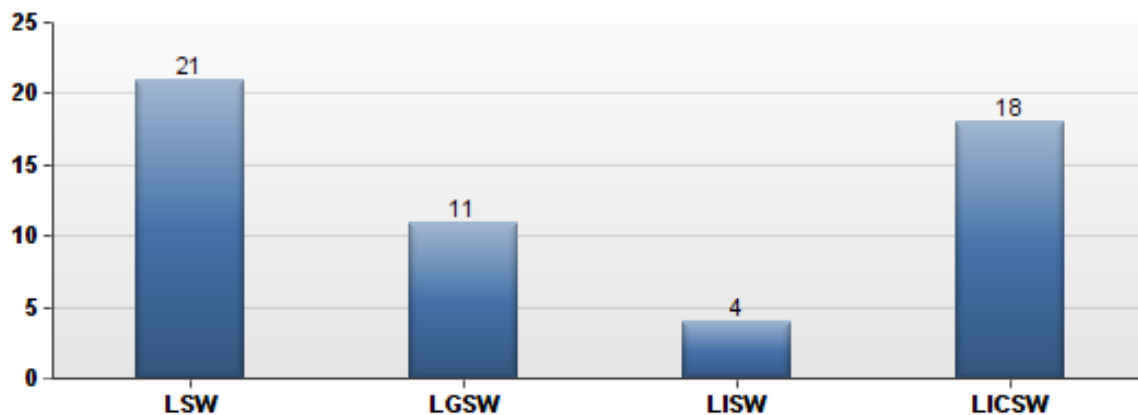
Race/ethnicity. This nominal variable measures the respondents' race/ethnicity. The response options are White/Caucasian, Hispanic or Latino, Black or African American, Native American or American Indian, Asian/Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, and Other. The research question for the study is: What is the race/ethnicity of the respondents? The findings show that 50 (93%) respondents are White/Caucasian, one (2%) respondent is Hispanic or Latino, two (4%) respondents are Black or African American, and one (2%) respondent is Asian/Pacific Islander. No responses were provided for Native American or American Indian, Middle Eastern, or Other. These findings show that the large majority of the sample is White/Caucasian.

Figure 3. Race/ethnicity.



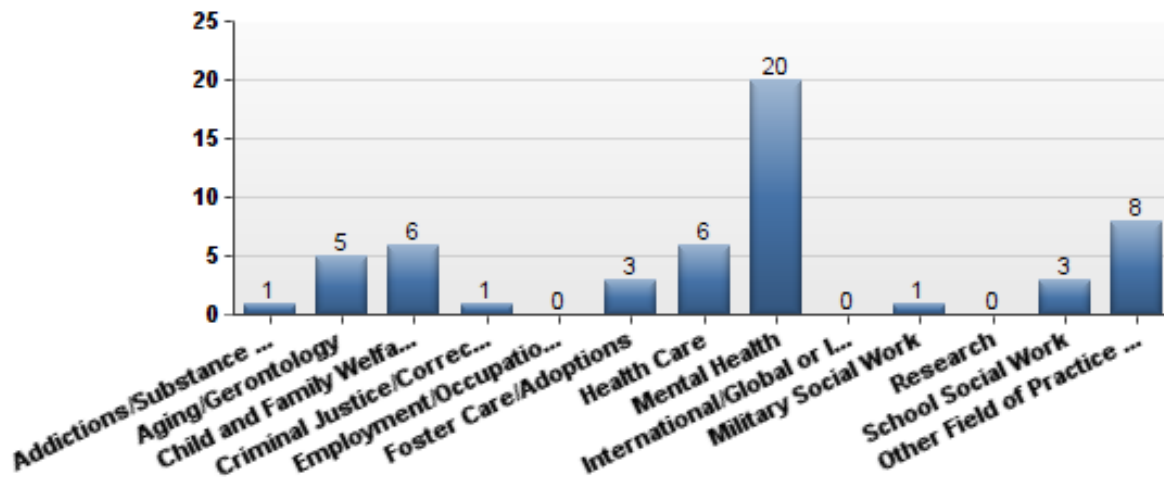
Current level of licensure. This nominal variable measures the respondents' current level of licensure. The response options are LSW, LGSW, LISW, and LICSW. The research question for the study is: What is the respondents' current level of licensure? The findings show that 21 (39%) respondents are LSW, 11 (20%) respondents are LGSW, four (7%) respondents are LISW, and 18 (33%) are LICSW. These findings show that the large majority of the sample is LSW and LICSW respectively.

Figure 4. Level of Licensure.



Area of social work practice. This nominal variable measures the respondents' area of social work practice that they consider most central to their practice. The response options are Addictions/Substance Abuse, Aging/Gerontology, Child and Family Welfare, Criminal Justice/Corrections, Employment/Occupational Social Work, Foster Care/Adoptions, Health Care, Mental Health, International/Global or Immigrant Issues, Military Social Work, Research, School Social Work, and Other Field of Practice. The research question for the study is: What area of social work practice are the respondents' in? The findings show that the top three areas of social work practice for the sample are Mental Health with 20 (37%) respondents, Health Care with six (11%) respondents, and Child and Family Welfare with six (11%) respondents. These findings show that the large majority of the sample works in a mental health setting.

Figure 5. Area of Social Work Practice.



Associations

Several nominal and ordinal variables were analyzed through *Qualtrics* using a chi-square process to determine if there was an association between two nominal and/or ordinal variables and if the association was statistically significant. The level of significance (p-value) of **.05 or less** is necessary in order reject the null hypothesis (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011). This level of significance was used for this research project.

Merging of answers. Some answers in the survey questions were merged together due to none or limited data in the response categories. For example, the answers in question number 16 “Which of the following categories do you feel best defines your level of work-related stress in the last year?” were merged together due to no reports of “very low level of work-related stress” and “low level of work-related stress”. Responses were merged to “very low level of work-related stress, low level of work-related stress, average level of work-related stress” and “high level of work-related stress, very high level of work-related stress”.

In addition, the answers in question number seven “How would you describe this field of practice in terms of levels of stress?” were merged together due to no reports of “never stressful”

and “seldom stressful” levels of stress in their field of practice. It was merged to “never stressful, seldom stressful, sometimes stressful” and “often stressful, always stressful”.

Furthermore, the answers in question number one “What is your age?” were merged together due to no reports of respondents “under 18 years old” and “75 years or older”. It was merged to “Under 18 years old, 18-24 years old”, “25-34 years old, 35-44 years old”, “45-54 years old, 55-64 years old”, and “65-74 years old, 75 years or older”.

Finally, two of the answers in question number 25 “How satisfied are you with the level of support you receive from your supervisor?” were merged due to no reports of respondents being “very dissatisfied”. The merge occurred with the answers regarding dissatisfaction. It was merged to “very dissatisfied, dissatisfied” and “satisfied” and “very satisfied” remained the same.

Results of chi-square analyses. Several cross-tabulations failed to reject the null hypothesis (p-value was greater than .05) indicating that there is no significant association between the two nominal or ordinal variables. In addition, it is hard to interpret the validity of all chi-square analyses discussed below because several cells had expected frequencies less than five. However, there is descriptive information within these crosstabulations that is of significance.

For instance, there is no statistically significant relationship (p-value = 0.96) between the role of the supervisor that the respondents consider most beneficial to their practice (question 15) and their level of work-related stress in the last year (question 16). However, 27 (73%) out of 37 respondents indicated that they consider the supportive role of the supervisor to be most beneficial to their practice. In addition, 29 (78.4%) out of 37 respondents stated providing support is one of the roles their supervisor provides for them and 15 (51.7%) of those

respondents indicated that they have very low level to average level of work-related stress in the last year. On the other hand, 14 (48.3%) respondents reported they have high to very high levels of stress despite the supervisor providing support. These findings suggest that the majority of the sample both like and receive support from their supervisor and the supportive role may or may not contribute to lower levels of work-related stress.

There is no statistically significant relationship ($p\text{-value} = 0.80$) between the area of social work practice (question six) and their description of the field in terms of levels of stress (question seven). However, no respondents perceive any social work job as not stressful. In fact, respondents reported that social work jobs are sometimes stressful to always stressful. In addition, the descriptive information in this crosstabulation demonstrates that the Mental Health area of social work practice is the most stressful field of practice. Twenty (37%) respondents consider Mental Health the area of social work practice most central to their practice and 10 (50%) respondents stated it is sometimes stressful and 10 (50%) respondents stated it is often to always stressful. These findings suggest that any social work job is stressful and a social work job in a mental health setting may be among the most stressful.

Although there is no statistically significant relationship ($p\text{-value} = 0.63$) between the respondents' gender (question two) and their level of work-related stress in the last year (question 16), six (66.7%) men who responded reported very low to average levels of work-related stress and three (33.3%) men who responded reported high to very high levels of work-related stress. Of the women who responded, 17 (48.6%) reported very low to average levels of work-related stress and 18 (51.4%) reported high to very high levels of work-related stress. The sample is unevenly distributed with more women than men who completed the survey. Due to the unevenness of the sample, it is unclear what these descriptive results really mean. In

addition, all respondents stated they had average to very high levels of work-related stress in the last year. No respondents identified that they had low to very low levels of work-related stress in the last year. These findings suggest that social workers, regardless of gender, encounter average to very high levels of work-related stress.

There is no statistically significant relationship ($p\text{-value} = 0.17$) between the respondents' current level of licensure (question four) and their level of work-related stress in the last year (question 16). However, nine (50%) respondents who identified their level of licensure as LSW stated they have high to very high levels of work-related stress compared to five (38.5%) respondents who identified their level of licensure as LICSW. Also, the crosstabulation between the number of years at the licensure level (question five) and level of work-related stress in the last year (question 16) showed that respondents who report high levels of stress have been at their level of licensure for 1-5 years. Then, the frequency count decreases as the years with their current level of licensure increases. This may be a function of the significantly lower number of respondents with higher years at their level of licensure. In addition, age (question one) may have an influence on social workers' perception of work-related stress (question 16). Two (33.3%) respondents 18-24 years old, 15 (60%) respondents 25-44 years old, and six (42.9%) respondents 45-64 years old stated they had very low to average levels of work-related stress in the last year. Four (66.7%) respondents 18-24 years old, 10 (45.5%) respondents 25-44 years old, and eight (57.1%) respondents 45-64 years old stated they had high to very high levels of work-related stress in the last year. These findings suggest that, within this sample, as respondents get older they identify with higher levels of stress and respondents between the ages of 25-44 years old have lower levels of stress.

Although there is no statistically significant relationship ($p\text{-value} = 0.97$) between the role of the supervisor that the respondents consider most beneficial to their practice (question 15) and supervision's impact on their work with clients (question 21), supportive supervision is noted to have a positive impact on their work with clients. Seventeen (65.4%) out of 36 respondents indicated that they thought the supportive role of the supervisor is the most beneficial to their practice and it has a positive impact on their work with clients. No respondents stated the supervisor has a negative impact on their work with clients. In addition, 17 (94.4%), 17 (73.9%), and 23 (79.3%) respondents out of 37 respondents stated that any role (education, administration, and supportive respectively) their supervisor provides for them (question 14) has a positive impact on their work with clients (question 21). Furthermore, 16 (55.2%) and 10 (34.5%) respondents out of 37 respondents reported that they are satisfied to very satisfied with the level of support they receive from their supervisor (question 25) when their supervisor provides a supportive role (question 14). Finally, 10 (34.5%) and 11 (37.9%) respondents out of 37 respondents noted that supportive supervision is helpful to very helpful respectively. These findings suggest that supervision, particularly supportive supervision, has a positive impact on their work with clients, respondents are satisfied to very satisfied with the level of supportive supervision they receive from their supervisor, and they perceive supportive supervision to be helpful to very helpful.

Finally, the ordinal variables in this study measures the length the respondent has received supervision (question 12) and the respondents' level of work-related stress in the last year (question 16). The response options for question 12 are "0-5 years", "6-10 years", "11-15 years", "16-20 years", and "20 years or more". The response options for question 16 are "very low level of work-related stress, low level of work-related stress, average level of work-related

stress” and “high level of work-related stress, very high level of work-related stress”. The question explored here is: Is there an association between the number of years receiving supervision and the level of work-related stress in the last year? The hypothesis is: There is an association between the number of years receiving supervision and the level of work-related stress in the last year. The null hypothesis is: There is no association between the number of years receiving supervision and the level of work-related stress in the last year.

Table 1. Length of Supervision and Levels of Work-Related Stress in the Last Year.

		Which of the following categories do you feel best defines your level of work-related stress in the last year?		
		Very low level of work-related stress, Low level of work-related stress, Average level of work-related stress	High level of work-related stress, Very high level of work-related stress	Total
How long have you received supervision?	0-5 years	16 66.67%	8 33.33%	24 100.00%
	6-10 years	1 20.00%	4 80.00%	5 100.00%
	11-15 years	0 0.00%	2 100.00%	2 100.00%
	16-20 years	0 0.00%	1 100.00%	1 100.00%
	20 years or more	1 16.67%	5 83.33%	6 100.00%
	Total	18 47.37%	20 52.63%	38 100.00%

		Which of the following categories do you feel best defines your level of work-related stress in the last year?
How long have you received supervision?	Chi Square	10.06*
	Degrees of Freedom	4
	p-value	0.04

**Note: The Chi-Square approximation may be inaccurate - expected frequency less than 5.*

The table above shows that there is a statistically significant relationship ($p\text{-value} = 0.04$) between the number of years a respondent has received supervision (question 12) and their level of work-related stress in the last year (question 16). It is noted that some of the cells have zero or one respondent which may impact the validity. In the years of supervision between 0-5 years, the perception of work-related stress is significantly different with 16 (66.7%) respondents

reporting very low to average levels of work-related stress and 8 (33.3%) respondents reporting high to very high levels of work-related stress. In relation to the measurement of respondents who have received supervision for 20 years or more, one (16.7%) respondent reported very low to average levels of work-related stress and five (83.3%) respondents reported high to very high levels of work-related stress. Future research may be important to understand the meaning of these differences.

Ways a Supervisor Helps Alleviate Stress

Forty-nine respondents responded to the qualitative questions “Please list the ways that working with your supervisor helps alleviate stress” (40 respondents) and “Please list the ways that working with past supervisors have helped alleviate stress” (nine respondents). These questions were analyzed using grounded theory methodology and coded based on constant comparison analysis (discussed in detail above) (Padgett, 2008). The subthemes are identified as role of supervisor – support, role of supervisor – administration, and role of supervisor – education. The subtheme role of the supervisor – support is broken down further into types of support the supervisor provides.

Role of supervisor - support. The subtheme role of the supervisor – support emerged from the data based on the respondents’ responses and definition provided to respondents in question 14. The definition of support in this sample is one who offers emotional support and makes efforts to assist workers with job-related concerns. After reviewing this information further, this subtheme was broken down further as different types of support were identified. A list of six concepts were identified and then further categorized to three concepts: emotional support, support from outside sources, and informational support.

Emotional support. Several respondents stated that “feeling supported,” having the chance to process or “vent” concerns or difficult situations, and having someone help them put things into perspective were key ways that working with their supervisor helped alleviate stress. A respondent who is a supervisee and supervisor concurs: “I am able to process any concerns or difficult situations with my supervisor. As a supervisor myself, my staff call or talk with me frequently for a second opinion, or simple [*sic*] someone to listen to them and help take a step back to put things in perspective and make any situation or crisis more manageable.” Other respondents noted that “affirmation and encouragement,” “supportive in my decisions, answers questions, and can help clinically solve issues,” listening, open communication, validation of feelings and decisions, “normalizes my feelings,” “brainstorming approaches,” “provides useful feedback,” understanding and acknowledgement “that things are tough,” and reassurance are ways that their supervisor helps alleviate stress.

A respondent noted that “often times my supervisor can relate to my stress, therefore making me believe more and more that stress is just a commonplace in social work.” This respondent feels emotionally supported when her supervisor relates to her stress and this is noted in other responses as well. In addition, respondents voiced that being a good listener, providing compliments and gratitude for their work, and feeling valued by their supervisor are ways in which supervisors help alleviate stress. Furthermore, providing “motivation,” being readily available and “consistent with weekly check-ins,” providing “guidance,” “wisdom,” “positive feedback,” and “constructive feedback” are ways that their supervisor helps alleviate stress. Finally, not judging an employee and being receptive are ways that a supervisor helps alleviate stress. One respondent voiced that “consultation where one is free to express all feelings—even those of incompetence in a particular situation” is a way that their past supervisor

helped alleviate stress. This respondent noted that an open environment where they are able to be themselves and express their frustrations and worries to their supervisor helps alleviate stress.

Support from outside sources. The concept of receiving support from outside sources such as patients, organizations, and other disciplines by one's supervisor is noted to help alleviate stress. A respondent reported that knowing their supervisor would "cover my butt when needed" helped alleviate stress for them. Other respondents agreed stating "having someone back me up" and "having her support in the decisions I make regarding patient care" were ways that their supervisors help alleviate their stress. They were able to feel less stressed because they had support from their supervisor from outside sources.

Informational support. Support from supervisors is also noted to be provided through information. Several respondents indicated that providing guidance, instruction, education, training, and clarification, being "honest about the limitations of our senior management and therefore the agency," working through difficult situations, providing "insight into the difficulties I am experience with a particular case," and sharing ideas are some ways that supervisors help alleviate stress. In addition, respondents stated getting information in the form of verbal "communication, sharing or discussing resources and "ideas for new tools," talking about self-care, and providing "suggestions for practicalities and for the work itself" are ways that a supervisor helps alleviate stress.

Role of supervisor - administration. The subtheme role of the supervisor – administration emerged from the data based on the respondents' responses and definition provided to respondents in question 14. The definition of administration in this sample is one who completes or delegates tasks to control and coordinate workers in order to get the job done. Several respondents noted that their supervisor helps alleviate stress by "breaking down

tasks, delegating work for me,” “help[ing] to manage [the] workload when the workload is overwhelming,” and providing “ideas to manage [the] caseload.” One respondent stated it was also helpful that their supervisor “keeps me on track when it feels there may not be a track.” This respondent noted that it is helpful when their supervisor helps control and coordinates their work.

On the other hand, respondents stated their supervisor helps alleviate stress when they are “not a micromanager,” “not pushy,” and are available to discuss concerns but “also allowed me to work independently as much as possible for my ability.” These respondents reported that their supervisors are not overbearing when completing or delegating tasks to control and coordinate workers in order to get the job done. Instead, they like the freedom their supervisor allows them to work independently and this alleviates stress for them.

Another administrative task that respondents stated helps alleviate stress if done by their supervisor is working with other colleagues and disciplines. For example, one respondent stated their supervisor “helps to reduce work-place stress among other colleagues.” A different respondent stated their supervisor “helps deal with differences between units.” They are able to rely on their supervisor to manage conflict and stress among colleagues and peers within the work place. Therefore, they are less stressed because they do not need to focus or become involved in this matter in the work place.

Respondents also reported their supervisor helps alleviate stress when they “buys [*sic*] food for the staff once in a while,” “talk about taking time off or ways to manage [the] caseload,” and provide “good direction,” leadership, and guidance. They also like having their supervisor provide oversight over their work through “monitor[ing] cases and be[ing] a decision

maker.” These supervisors complete or delegate tasks to control and coordinate workers in order to get the job done.

Role of supervisor - education. The subtheme role of the supervisor – education emerged from the data based on the respondents’ responses and definition provided to respondents in question 14. The definition of education in this sample is one who trains workers with knowledge and skill. A number of respondents noted that their supervisor helped alleviate stress by providing “education” to staff and themselves, “education and training,” “opportunities for learning during discussion,” and “opportunities for necessary & innovative training.” They also like it when their supervisor “share[s] ideas,” discusses “self care” and “techniques to improve client care such as motivational interviewing skills,” and helps “me learn what I could do to improve practice the next time a similar situation happens.” One respondent reported it is helpful when their supervisor provides a “better understanding of particular mental health issues” when they are unsure or uncertain about a matter. Their supervisor is able to impart their knowledge and skills and this helps alleviate stress for them.

Ways a Supervisor Creates Stress

Forty-nine respondents responded to the qualitative questions “Please list the ways that working with your supervisor creates stress” (40 respondents) and “Please list the ways that working with past supervisors have created stress” (nine respondents). These questions were analyzed using grounded theory methodology perspective and coded based on constant comparison analysis (discussed in detail above) (Padgett, 2008). The subthemes are identified as work demands, stressed supervisor, lack of support, time, not meetings needs or expectations, and desire to please supervisor.

Work demands. Several respondents reported that their supervisor “adds too much onto [their] plate” or increases their workload, accountability, “job demands, [and] requirements,” and has “demanding deadlines.” One respondent stated “he [the supervisor] adds more responsibilities and tasks without removing any, which makes it difficult to complete my work.” Many respondents agreed with this and reported that their supervisor increases their workload with the “addition of new tasks,” duties, and responsibilities “with no additional time to complete them.” Respondents noted that it is “inconvenient at times” and it is “busy work.” They become stressed and frustrated especially “when they [supervisors] piled on small projects in addition to keeping 40 clients safe.”

Similarly, one respondent noted that “mandatory meetings” create stress. A different respondent reported that “high performance measures to meet and extra pressure added to complete materials timely and well despite crises and other issues arising” creates stress. Finally, a respondent stated that their supervisor creates stress when “he delegates duties that he could take on himself-causes a little frustration, which can lead to stress as I am busy with other daily tasks.”

Stressed supervisor. Respondents reported that stress is created for them when their supervisor is stressed. As a result, their supervisor creates “tension,” “is unable to control her emotions and therefore her reactions,” and makes mistakes or “are over their head.” One respondent noted this in their response when they stated their supervisor creates stress “if they are not managing their own stress well, or if they make a mistake or are over their head and not willing to admit it.” A different respondent noted that “his [the supervisor] mood affects the relationship” when their supervisor is stressed. If a supervisor is stressed, it affects the

relationship, their performance, and their emotions. Consequently, this creates stress for supervisees.

Lack of support. Several respondents reported that a lack of support from their supervisor creates stress. The responses demonstrate that respondents feel a lack of support in the form of emotional support, informational support, administrative support, and educational support. Respondents noted their supervisor creates stress if their supervisor does not demonstrate “empathy,” “undermines her decisions,” does not provide affirmation, “does not suggest ways to alleviate stress,” and is “not able to help with problems within [the] caseload.” In addition, supervisors create stress if their supervisees’ think they have to “deal with problems alone,” they disagree on “how to handle difficult situations,” and their supervisor provides “more oversight and criticism of work.”

Respondents also noted that their supervisor creates stress if “there is not a lot of processing re: *[sic]* families and best practice, new ideas for engaging,” “my supervisor struggles to hear what my concerns are and does not want to problem solve with me, rather tell[s] me how to address a situation,” and “when [my] supervisor operates from an emotional reaction to client distress and becomes highly directive/corrective toward me, without checking out the actual situation, making presumptions.” Another respondent noted that they feel stressed if a supervisor is “judgmental and didn’t respect the previous experience I had, treated me like a new grad even after having proven myself.” A different respondent stated that they think their supervisor creates stress when they do “not show emotional support, [are] not supportive of your co-workers, [and are] not able to offer valid trainings related to our job.”

Finally, two respondents noted that their supervisor creates stress when there is a lack of administrative support. One respondent stated “my supervisor is more administrative in

nature. Stress is created when he aligns himself with administration and doesn't advocate for the mental health staff which occurred this year." A different respondent noted that their supervisor creates stress when they "micro manage" and does not allow them to work independently.

Time. A supervisor creates stress by not allowing enough time for supervision, having "too much supervision," and "not being available" or "accessible." One respondent stated that "my time with her [supervisor] is limited to [a] 1:1 session of one hour per month 'because I am a LICSW'." This respondent reported that they wanted more time with their supervisor but their level of licensure creates a barrier to increased monthly supervision and this creates stress for them. A couple respondents noted that their supervisor is "not available when needed." A different respondent stated that "I do not access her often, but she is enormously busy (special services director at four schools) so [she] is not always accessible when collaboration is needed." These respondents stated their supervisors are not available or accessible and this creates stress for them.

Finally, supervisors create stress for supervisees through scheduling time for supervision and "poor time management." Two respondents stated that "making sure we both have time in our schedule to meet can at times be stressful" and "it takes time out of the work schedule when billable hours need to be met." These respondents noted that taking time out of client interaction and their schedule creates stress. In addition, their supervisors' lack of time management creates stress for them.

Not meeting needs or expectations. Supervisors create stress for supervisees when they do not meet the supervisee's or agency's needs or expectations. Respondents reported that they become stressed when their supervisor "answers too quickly, does not remember previous discussions," is "not very directive, not as skilled clinically," "wants to rush by things that I feel

are important, things I need to learn,” is “disorganized,” “has no field experience, knows less about field work than the supervisee, [is] too wrapped up in their own advancement and agency politics,” “is somewhat inconsistent,” and has “unclear expectations” for workers. Several respondents reported that inconsistency in answers and “not remembering direction that was previously given by them” creates stress for them.

They also stated their supervisor creates stress “because supervision is sparse and inconsistent, often times suggestions feel off the mark and ill-informed, not very helpful” and their supervisor is “not knowledgeable in what we do or what our workload looks like, focusing only on certain meeting model and not others, [and] not handling situations where co-workers are not completing their job tasks.” Furthermore, one respondent noted that their supervisor is “requiring unethical practices” and another respondent reported that “my current supervisor wears a variety of hats. I believe that due to this my supervisor is unable to be effective in her role as supervisor.” Supervisees have needs and expectations that the supervisors are not meeting and this creates stress.

Desire to please supervisor. The desire to please or impress their supervisor creates stress for respondents. One respondent stated “I want to impress her, so I push myself too hard.” A different respondent reported they “don’t want to [be a] disappointment [to] my supervisor.” A third respondent stated their supervisor creates stress for them because the respondent is “anxious about [their] performance.” These statements indicate that respondents want to do well and make a good impression on their supervisor and are anxious about their performance around their supervisor. The respondents’ desire to please their supervisor creates stress for them.

Supervisor’s Impact on Clients

Fifty respondents responded to the qualitative questions “How do you see supervision as having a positive impact on your work with clients?” (39 respondents), “How do you see supervision as having a neutral impact on your work with clients?” (11 respondents), and “How do you see supervision as having a negative impact on your work with clients?” (Zero respondents). These questions were populated through the *Qualtrics* survey based on the respondents’ answer to question 21. These questions were analyzed using grounded theory methodology and coded based on constant comparison analysis (discussed in detail above) (Padgett, 2008). The subthemes are identified as positive impact, neutral impact, and negative impact. The subtheme of positive impact is further broken down into other perspectives and ideas, support, parallel process, education, and best practice. The subtheme of neutral impact is further broken down into quality and consistency of client services and lack of supervisor support.

Positive impact. As stated above, 39 respondents reported that they see supervision as having a positive impact on their work with clients. This subtheme is divided into five concepts that illustrate its positive impact.

Other perspectives and ideas. Several respondents stated that supervision “brings a different perspective” which opens their mind, “helps to reground us and look outside our box when we are stuck,” gives “new ideas,” and “allows for different ideas to accomplish the task.” One respondent stated “it’s good to have a second opinion/another ear because my supervisor has been doing this work for a long time and sees things that I don’t.” A couple respondents reported that their supervisor is more “objective” and this helps them “see what I need to do or do differently,” “take a step back and review the situation when I’m too involved in the case,” and provides “further insight into problems or situations and [I] am better able to help

the client.” They also noted that supervision “provides ideas for interventions that work on client engagement and motivation” which positively impacts their work with clients. A respondent that is a supervisor stated “I’m able to give them more resources and ideas than I would be able to share just on my own information” through supervision. All of these components of supervision positively impact the respondents’ work with clients.

Support. Several respondents noted that supervision provides emotional support and assists them with job-related concerns which have a positive impact on their work with clients. One respondent stated “I am able to process stressful situations, which helps me calm down and be able to return to new stressful situations!” Many respondents reported that they are able to consult, problem solve, and process concerns, situations, and issues they have with clients, staff, and family members of clients. Respondents noted that they like to discuss cases and receive feedback on the best way to handle difficult situations in supervision and this has a positive impact on their work with clients.

A number of respondents noted that the emotional support provided through supervision “keeps me grounded in empathy and understanding,” “brings the best out of me,” makes them feel “empowered to go into difficult client situations,” and “allows me to feel more confident in my direction with a client.” They view supervision as a way to “defuse” which “allows me to better serve my clients in that I have someone to guide me if needed and someone to help alleviate my stress so I can better work with a difficult/challenging situation/client.” A respondent stated that their supervisor “cares about students in our district, knows many of them and their situations specifically and so is motivated to help in a similar way that I am. She is also very well informed about legal issues and due process so [that] can be helpful and reassuring

when these matters arise.” These respondents reported that supervision provides emotional support and positively impacts their work with clients.

Finally, some respondents indicated that supervision positively impacts their work with clients by providing support from outside sources. One respondent stated that the supervisor “can be the fall person in difficult situations.” Another respondent reported supervision provides “good connections with the community” and likes that the supervisor is “willing to defend the worker.” Similarly, a different respondent noted that their supervisor “backs me up when there are difficult families to deal with.” These respondents stated that supervision provides support from outside sources and positively impacts their work with clients.

Parallel process. Many respondents explicitly and implicitly noted that supervision provides a positive impact on their work with clients through a parallel process. In other words, supervisees use supervision to alleviate stress and this helps them be less stressed and work more effectively with clients. For example, one respondent stated “I am supported and so then I can better support my clients.” Another respondent reported “with parallel process, when my supervisor is alleviating my stress, I can do better work with clients.” A different respondent who is a supervisor stated “my staff call me when upset or stressed and we discuss the situation. I am often able to give staff an ear to listen and help vent frustration and also offer advice and understanding in working with our families. They are then able to go back to the families and partner more effectively.” These respondents use supervision to alleviate their stress and work more effectively with clients.

In addition, respondents use supervision to receive emotional support and education; consequently, they are able provide emotional support and use the skills to work better with clients. A respondent noted that “it is nice to get the support of making the right decision, and

consulting can help with progress and can help alleviate stress, which can help the client to not be as stressed.” Other respondents stated that “the wisdom they give to me then gets sent back to the client,” “professional supervision helps me to be the best professional I can be,” and “it helps keep us educated and equipped to teach skills to clients.” Supervision positively impacts their work with clients through the parallel process.

Education. Respondents noted that they receive education in supervision and this positively impacts their work with clients. One respondent stated “I am given education and support with my clinical work [so] I can be more effective as a clinician.” Another respondent noted that education in supervision “improves clinical work, [and a] way of problem solving.” A different respondent reported that “most of the time, supervisors are in the position they are in because they are good at direct client work. It helps to have someone who has ‘been there’ who can help coach you through a situation. [It p]rovides new skills and role play opportunities to try with clients.” These respondents indicated that the education they receive in supervision has a positive impact on their work with clients.

Best practice. A couple respondents stated that supervision positively impacts their work with clients because it focuses on best practice. Respondents reported that supervision “focuses on best practice which ultimately affects the service I provide to my clients,” “ensure[s that] clients are treated ethically and getting the best service possible,” and “set[s] standards around providing good customer service.” In this study, respondents noted that a social workers’ work with clients is positively impacted through the focus of quality and ethical services in supervision.

Neutral impact. As described above, 11 respondents reported that they see supervision as having a neutral impact on their work with clients. This subtheme is divided into two concepts that illustrate its neutral impact.

Quality and consistency of client services. Some respondents stated that supervision has a neutral impact on the quality and consistency of client services. One respondent reported that “I feel that supervision does not enlighten me in the client relationship but rather is a task I must complete to comply with regulations.” Another respondent stated their supervisor “provides suggestions to me but does not require me to do anything unless governed by law.” A different respondent reported that their supervisor “doesn’t seem to be available, knowledgeable and is mainly focused on numbers and grants and not the work that is being done.” These respondents noted supervision has a neutral impact on the quality and consistency of client services due to regulations and their supervisors’ focus on other issues instead of focusing on client care.

Lack of supervisor support. Many respondents reported that there is a lack of supervision and this has a neutral impact on their work with clients. Respondents stated that “it neither enhances nor prohibits my performance as an employee—supervision is basically absent,” “the role I am in is very independent and does not require the level of supervision that other previous positions required,” there is a “lack of strong supervision,” and “he’s mostly in the background and I hardly ever talk to him and see him. I maybe see him twice per month is all.” These respondents noted that the absence of supervision has a neutral impact on their work with clients. Another respondent voiced concern about the lack of support from their supervisor: “I was very successful, effective, and well liked despite my supervisor treating me like I’d never seen a client before.” This respondent reported that the lack of support from their supervisor regarding their skills and competence had a neutral impact on their work with clients.

Negative impact. No respondents reported that they see supervision as having a negative impact on their work with clients. These findings are consistent with the descriptive statistics and inferential statistics findings described in detail above.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine how the role of the supervisor impacts social workers' perceptions of stress in social work practice and how social workers measure the experience of supervision. This study failed to find a statistically significant association between the role of the supervisor and the level of work-related stress in the last year. However, the study found that supervisors can both alleviate and create stress for supervisees, respondents consider the supportive role of the supervisor to be most beneficial to their practice, social workers perceive any social work job as stressful, and respondents are satisfied with the level of supportive supervision they receive from their supervisor. Furthermore, respondents perceive supportive supervision to be helpful.

Key Findings and Considerations

Supervisor and stress. Research indicates that supervisors can be a cause of stress and also help in preventing stress (Collings & Murray, 1996; Collins, 2008; Dillenburg, 2004; Himle et al., 1991; Lloyd et al., 2002; Mor Barak et al., 2009; Rauktis & Koeske, 1994). This study was consistent with literature and found that supervisors can both help alleviate stress and create stress for supervisees. Respondents noted that supervisors help alleviate stress through the roles of support, education, and administration. Respondents also reported that supervisors create stress through increased work demands, being stressed themselves, not providing support, not meeting needs or expectations, time restraints and limitations, and supervisees' feeling compelled to please their supervisor. As described above in the literature review, research shows

that the themes of support, education, and administration are ways a supervisor alleviates stress. In addition, increased work demands, lack of support, not meeting needs or expectation, and desire to please their supervisor are themes related to the creation of stress for workers in this study and research.

Supportive role of the supervisor. Respondents indicated that they consider the supportive role of the supervisor to be most beneficial to their practice. In addition, supervision, particularly supportive supervision, has a positive impact on their work with clients. Furthermore, respondents noted that they are satisfied with the level of supportive supervision they receive from their supervisor and they perceive supportive supervision to be helpful. Finally, the majority of respondents stated providing support is one of the roles their supervisor provides for them; these respondents have very low level to average level of work-related stress in the last year.

These findings suggest that the majority of the sample both like and receive support from their supervisor and it may contribute to lower levels of work-related stress. This corresponds with previous research. Research indicates support from supervisors helps alleviate stress (Acker, 1999; Collings & Murray, 1996; Collins, 2008; Dillenburger, 2004; Himle et al., 1991; Lloyd et al., 2002; Mor Barak et al., 2009; Rauktis & Koeske, 1994; Storey & Billingham, 2001). In addition, Storey and Billingham (2001) stated “the higher the level of support received, the lower the level of stress. This pattern also emerges for levels of support from seniors/supervisors and level of stress. . . . Support from seniors/supervisors was more effective in reducing stress levels” (p. 667). Research and this study reveal that support from supervisors is beneficial for the worker and client outcomes and contributes to lower levels of stress for workers.

More frequent supervision. Literature and research findings imply that more frequent, regular, extensive, better informed, and more sensitive supervision is likely to provide more effective support for social workers (Collins, 2008). The qualitative findings in this study demonstrate that most respondents want more frequent, regular supervision. Respondents reported that “weekly consistent check-ins” and having their supervisor “readily available” helps alleviate stress. Likewise, a supervisor’s limited availability and accessibility creates stress for workers. Furthermore, it is noted that respondents prefer supervisors who are well-informed and can provide information and education that can enhance their skills and work with clients.

Consistency, client services, and parallel process. There are also similarities in the research and this study regarding the role of the supervisor and its impact on consistency, quality of client services, and the parallel process. Both research reviewed and respondents in this study note that supervisors who are inconsistent, have unclear expectations, and do not remember the direction that was previously given creates stress for supervisees. In addition, previous research and this study reveal that good supervision stresses the need for high-quality and ethical client services, provides practical assistance and a role model for staff, and stresses the need for professionals to base their work on available knowledge and to be active in evaluation of their own practice (Cotter Mena & Bailey, 2007; Kaiser, 1997; Kickul & Posig, 2001; Kim & Lee, 2009; Weinbach & Taylor, 2011).

Shulman (2010) argued that there is a parallel process between the supervisor-supervisee relationship and the interaction between supervisees and clients. This study demonstrates that respondents explicitly and implicitly noted that supervision provides a positive impact on their work with clients through a parallel process. Research and respondents in this study note that supervisors’ act as models and their words and actions are crucial to the supervisor-supervisee

relationship. In addition, the supervisors' actions support customer service and interaction with clients by supervisees.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Supervision is necessary and generally has a positive impact on social workers' work with clients as noted in this study. In fact, licensure supervision is required by the Minnesota Board of Social Work for social workers with LSW, LGSW, and LISW licenses who are working in clinical or non-clinical practice. In addition, several social workers receive supervision for their job. There is a strong emphasis on supervision in the social work field because it

provides evaluation and direction of the services provided by the social worker to promote competent and ethical services to clients through the continuing development of the social worker's knowledge and application of accepted professional social work knowledge, skills, and values. (Board of Social Work, 2014)

Supervision should and will continue to be an integral part of social work practice and supervisors will be able to understand and apply the findings of this study to their practice to positively contribute to the supervisor-supervisee relationship. Thus, it has potential to positively impact the supervisee's work with clients.

Social workers who are supervisors will also be able to employ strategies based on the findings to decrease stress in their social work practice as well as be more prepared to provide quality supervision and help staff members develop the skills needed for carrying out their work (Himle et al., 1991; Kickul & Posig, 2001; Mor Barak et al., 2009; Shulman, 2010; Zhang et al., 2013). For example, supervisors should ensure that they are providing support to their workers because this is seen as most helpful, it alleviates stress for workers, and most respondents are

satisfied with receiving support from their supervisor. In addition, supervisors should try to be consistent with their messages, availability, and scheduling of supervision meetings. Finally, a supervisor should be attuned to employee needs and respond accordingly to indications that an employee might be experiencing ongoing symptoms of work-related stress. In turn, this will enrich the social work field by contributing to the development of well-prepared social workers, decrease stress for social workers, and positively influence the outcomes of practice with clients (Cotter Mena & Bailey, 2007; Shulman, 2010).

Implications for Policy

Previous research indicates that stress impacts both the social worker and quality of services provided to clients. “Social work professionals with low levels of work-related stress are more productive and therefore more beneficial to client systems served by the agency” (Vosejka, 2008, p. 34). Acker (1999) agrees that social workers who are burned out and do not have satisfaction in their jobs are more likely to provide poor quality of services. Job satisfaction is of particular importance and studies have shown that stress can lead to decreased job performance which can have an impact on the quality of the social worker’s work and work morale (Dillenburg, 2004; Storey & Billingham, 2001). It can also impact staff turn-over as people “attempt to get away from poor conditions, stress, over-work, low morale and factors creating dissatisfaction” (Storey & Billingham, 2001, p. 662). Social work policy should continue to have supervision requirements for licensure because it benefits the worker, organization, and clients. In addition, agencies may want to review organizational policies related to the requirements of supervision and create or modify policies to ensure licensed social workers are receiving appropriate supervision for their jobs.

In addition, prior research and this study note the parallel process between the supervisor-supervisee relationship and the interaction between supervisees and clients. Both also reveal the positive impact of supervision on client outcomes through the parallel process; however, funding sources for agencies do not recognize the impact of supervision on client outcomes and they do not reimburse the agency for the time supervisees spend in supervision. Future policy should propose that funding sources for agencies should count, support, and reimburse for the time spent by licensed social workers of all levels in supervision. In turn, funding agencies may notice that there are better outcomes for them in terms of cost of client services as supervisees use the direction and guidance received through supervision to provide high quality services and best practice for clients. This will positively impact client outcomes and may reduce the length of time for a client to recover and meet their goals. In other words, funding agencies may pay less in the long run for client care because there may be fewer hospitalizations and shorter time spent in treatment.

Implications for Research

There are also some implications from this study for further social work research. This study and previous research has focused primarily on the individual and their experiences of stress and supervision. Future research might focus on the organizational structure of social work and explore ways of addressing the sources of stress that are located within its structures. This potential research study would help the development of macro and mezzo level policies to lessen and prevent work-related stress. Increased knowledge in this area could greatly influence the satisfaction of social workers and their practice with clients.

This study noted that there is an association between the number of years a respondent has received supervision and their level of work-related stress in the last year. It also revealed

that more experienced respondents indicated high to very high levels of work-related stress in the last year than less experienced respondents who indicated very low to average levels of work-related stress in the last year. Future research may focus on the frequency of supervision received and its impact on levels of work-related stress to test why more experienced licensed social workers are experiencing high to very high levels of work-related stress in the last year.

Finally, future research could focus on the supervisor and how they provide employee support and assist with stress reduction. It may also focus on the impact of stress on supervisors, what they do to cope with stress, and possible areas for intervention and support strategies. Furthermore, future research may focus on the supervisor's role in supervision, how they perceive stress, and how they measure the experience of supervision. This may lead to organizational changes or policy changes which would make available a range of opportunities for mutual group support at work.

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths of this research proposal are that it was standardized, inexpensive, provided both quantitative data and qualitative data, and made available ease of data analysis. In addition, subjects were selected using a simple random sample. This was beneficial for this fairly small-scale project because it provided adequate sampling frames (Monette et al., 2011). In addition, it provided a significant amount of licensed social workers and social work supervisors for some of the analysis.

Limitations include that findings are from one specific population (licensed social workers) and not all questions were answered on the survey. Also, the *Qualtrics* survey may have directed people away from questions based on certain characteristics due to conditionally populating questions for respondents based on answer selection to previous questions in the

survey or respondents' choosing to not answer questions in the survey. There is a lack of ability to reproduce the study with consistent results. In addition, the majority of the variables were nominal or ordinal and an inferential analysis other than the chi-square could not be used. This limited the analysis of the quantitative data and did not provide other options to test for associations between two variables. Furthermore, the expected frequencies in some cells in the majority of the chi-square analyses were less than five and this made it difficult to interpret the data analysis.

Finally, details came up in the qualitative data that the researcher was not able to follow up on or ask the respondent for clarification. For example, the researcher had to make interpretations of the responses and provide a best guess as to what the respondents were trying to say since there were no opportunities to ask clarifying questions. Consequently, this is another limitation. The qualitative data analysis depended on the researcher's knowledge and interpretation and another researcher would not necessarily achieve the same results if they replicated the qualitative portion of this study. In other words, they might make different decisions about interpretation. This variation can change the results of the qualitative portion and can make study results inconsistent even if two studies have the same approach.

Conclusion

Social work is a demanding profession and many social workers experience stress (Collins, 2008). This study reinforces existing research and it is paramount that social workers continue to understand the supervisory relationship and its relationship with worker stress and client outcomes. As illustrated in the research and this study, supervisors can both alleviate stress and create stress for supervisees. In addition, research and this study demonstrate that supervisors have an impact on client outcomes through the parallel process.

The findings of this study can provide insight and information for social workers who are supervisors and who are supervisees. Social workers who are supervisors are able to understand and apply the findings to their practice and positively contribute to the supervisor-supervisee relationship. They are also able to employ strategies to decrease stress in social work practice as well as be more prepared to provide quality supervision and help staff members develop the skills needed for carrying out their work (Himle et al., 1991; Kickul & Posig, 2001; Mor Barak et al., 2009; Shulman, 2010; Zhang et al., 2013). In turn, this will enrich the social work field by contributing to the development of well-prepared social workers, decrease stress for social workers, and positively influence the outcomes of practice with clients (Cotter Mena & Bailey, 2007; Shulman, 2010).

Similarly, social workers who receive supervision are better able to understand the supervisor-supervisee relationship and play an active role in influencing the behavior of the supervisor and the outcome of the supervisor-supervisee process (Mor Barak et al., 2009; Shulman, 2010). Social workers are also able to utilize the supervisor for support and as a protective factor against stress. Finally, the answers positively contribute to the social work field and to client outcomes (Cotter Mena & Bailey, 2007; Shulman, 2010).

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Appendix A**Survey Questions****Q1 What is your age?**

- ☐ Under 18 years old (1)
- ☐ 18-24 years old (2)
- ☐ 25-34 years old (3)
- ☐ 35-44 years old (4)
- ☐ 45-54 years old (5)
- ☐ 55-64 years old (6)
- ☐ 65-74 years old (7)
- ☐ 75 years or older (8)

Q2 What is your gender?

- ☐ Man (1)
- ☐ Woman (2)
- ☐ Transgender (3)

Q3 What is your race/ethnicity?

- ☐ White/Caucasian (1)
- ☐ Hispanic or Latino (2)
- ☐ Black or African American (3)
- ☐ Native American or American Indian (4)
- ☐ Asian/Pacific Islander (5)
- ☐ Middle Eastern (6)
- ☐ Other (please specify) (7) _____

Q4 What is your current level of licensure?

- ☐ LSW (1)
- ☐ LGSW (2)
- ☐ LISW (3)
- ☐ LICSW (4)

Q5 How many years have you held that level of licensure?

- ☐ Less than 1 year (1)
- ☐ 1-5 years (2)
- ☐ 6-10 years (3)
- ☐ 11-15 years (4)
- ☐ 16-20 years (5)
- ☐ 21-25 years (6)
- ☐ 26 years or more (7)

Q6 What area of social work practice are you in? (Choose the area of social work practice that you consider most central to your practice.)

- ☐ Addictions/Substance Abuse (1)
- ☐ Aging/Gerontology (2)
- ☐ Child and Family Welfare (3)
- ☐ Criminal Justice/Corrections (4)
- ☐ Employment/Occupational Social Work (5)
- ☐ Foster Care/Adoptions (6)
- ☐ Health Care (7)
- ☐ Mental Health (8)
- ☐ International/Global or Immigrant Issues (9)
- ☐ Military Social Work (10)
- ☐ Research (11)
- ☐ School Social Work (12)
- ☐ Other Field of Practice (please specify) (13) _____

Q7 How would you describe this field of practice in terms of levels of stress?

- ☐ Never stressful (1)
- ☐ Seldom stressful (2)
- ☐ Sometimes stressful (3)
- ☐ Often stressful (4)
- ☐ Always stressful (5)

Q8 How long have you been in your current position?

- ☐ 0-5 years (1)
- ☐ 6-10 years (2)
- ☐ 11-15 years (3)
- ☐ 16-20 years (4)
- ☐ 20 years or more (5)

Q9 Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time?

- ☐ Supervisor (1)
- ☐ Supervisee (2)
- ☐ Both (3)
- ☐ Not working at this time (4)

Answer If Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Supervisor Is Selected Or Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Supervisee Is Selected Or Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Both Is Selected

Q10 What type of supervision do you receive or provide? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Job (1)
- ☐ Licensure (2)
- ☐ Other (please specify) (3) _____

Answer If Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Supervisor Is Selected Or Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Both Is Selected

Q11 How long have you supervised another social worker?

- ☐ 0-5 years (1)
- ☐ 6-10 years (2)
- ☐ 11-15 years (3)
- ☐ 16-20 years (4)
- ☐ 20 years or more (5)

Answer If Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Supervisee Is Selected Or Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Both Is Selected

Q12 How long have you received supervision?

- ☐ 0-5 years (1)
- ☐ 6-10 years (2)
- ☐ 11-15 years (3)
- ☐ 16-20 years (4)
- ☐ 20 years or more (5)

Answer If Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Supervisee Is Selected Or Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Both Is Selected

Q13 If you receive supervision, how would you describe the supervision you receive within your agency and from your supervisor?

- ☐ Not helpful (1)
- ☐ Somewhat helpful (2)
- ☐ Helpful (3)
- ☐ Very helpful (4)

Answer If Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Supervisee Is Selected Or Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Both Is Selected

Q14 If you receive supervision, what role does your supervisor provide for you? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Education - trains workers with knowledge and skill (1)
- ☐ Administration - completes or delegates tasks to control and coordinate workers in order to get the job done (2)
- ☐ Supportive - offers emotional support and makes efforts to assist workers with job-related concerns (3)

Answer If Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Supervisee Is Selected Or Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Both Is Selected

Q15 Of these three roles a supervisor may provide for you, which role do you consider the most beneficial to your practice?

- ☐ Education (1)
- ☐ Administration (2)
- ☐ Supportive (3)

Answer If Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Supervisor Is Selected Or Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Supervisee Is Selected Or Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Both Is Selected

Q16 Which of the following categories do you feel best defines your level of work-related stress in the last year?

- ☐ Very low level of work-related stress (1)
- ☐ Low level of work-related stress (2)
- ☐ Average level of work-related stress (3)
- ☐ High level of work-related stress (4)
- ☐ Very high level of work-related stress (5)

Answer If Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Supervisor Is Selected Or Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Supervisee Is Selected Or Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Both Is Selected

Q17 Please list the ways that working with your supervisor helps alleviate stress.

Answer If Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Not working at this time Is Selected

Q18 Please list the ways that working with past supervisors have helped alleviate stress.

Answer If Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Supervisor Is Selected Or Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Supervisee Is Selected Or Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Both Is Selected

Q19 Please list the ways that working with your supervisor creates stress.

Answer If Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Not working at this time Is Selected

Q20 Please list the ways that working with past supervisors have created stress.

Q21 Do you see supervision as having a positive, neutral, or negative impact on your work with clients?

- ☐ Positive (1)
- ☐ Neutral (2)
- ☐ Negative (3)

Answer If Do you see supervision as having a positive, neutral, or negative impact on your work with clients? Positive Is Selected

Q22 How do you see supervision as having a positive impact on your work with clients?

Answer If Do you see supervision as having a positive, neutral, or negative impact on your work with clients? Neutral Is Selected

Q23 How do you see supervision as having a neutral impact on your work with clients?

Answer If Do you see supervision as having a positive, neutral, or negative impact on your work with clients? Negative Is Selected

Q24 How do you see supervision as having a negative impact on your work with clients?

Answer If Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Supervisor Is Selected Or Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Supervisee Is Selected Or Are you currently a supervisor, supervisee, both, or not working at this time? Both Is Selected

Q25 How satisfied are you with the level of support you receive from your supervisor?

- ☐ Very Dissatisfied (1)
- ☐ Dissatisfied (2)
- ☐ Satisfied (3)
- ☐ Very Satisfied (4)

Appendix B**CONSENT FORM
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS****The role of the supervisor and its impact on stress in social work
528295-1**

I am conducting a study about the role of the supervisor and its impact on stress in social work. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because you currently are licensed through the Minnesota Board of Social Work. In addition, you have experience as a supervisor, supervisee, or both. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Quinn Johnson, a graduate student in the School of Social Work at the University of St. Thomas/St. Catherine University. I am supervised by Karen Carlson, MSSW, LICSW, PhD at the University of St. Thomas.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is: to provide quantitative and qualitative information regarding the role of the supervisor and its impact on stress in social work. The study will provide insight and information for social workers who are supervisors and who are supervised. Previous research suggests that supervision can be a protective factor against stress or can be a cause of stress. Social workers who are supervisors will be able to understand and apply the findings to their practice and positively contribute to the supervisor-supervisee relationship. They will also be able to employ strategies to decrease stress in social work practice as well as be more prepared to provide quality supervision and help staff members develop the skills needed for carrying out their work.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: click on the link in the email or copy and paste the link into a new URL, answer the questions in the survey, and submit the survey once completed. The structured survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Your participation in the survey will imply informed consent.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

There are no known risks and direct benefits of being in the study.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way. The types of records I

will create include transcripts and computer records. The data from the transcripts and survey will be kept at a home office on a secure password protected computer. My research advisor will have access to the data for review during analysis; however, data identifying the subjects will not be available to her or anyone other than me. The data and records will be destroyed by May 31, 2014.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer and may stop the interview at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the School of Social Work, the Minnesota Board of Social Work, the University of St. Thomas or St. Catherine University, or the researcher in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw, data collect about you will not be used.

Contacts and Questions

My name is Quinn Johnson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 701-371-6199. My instructor is Karen Carlson, MSSW, LICSW, PhD and she can be reached at 651-962-5867. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-5341 with any questions or concerns.

Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age.

Signature of Study Participant

Date

Print Name of Study Participant

**Signature of Parent or Guardian
(If applicable)**

Date

**Print Name of Parent or Guardian
(If Applicable)**

Quinn Johnson
Signature of Researcher

11/14/2013
Date